

Cost Perspective of Ayurveda: The Question of Affordability

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Abstract

Ayurveda is a medicine system that is invaluable to Indian heritage and culture. It provides a lot of value with endless accessibility and practicality. Ayurveda is well-known for its individualized treatment plans and emphasis on preventive health. As it becomes more and more popular globally, the question of its affordability and accessibility must be examined and this article aims to accomplish the same. This article discusses the factors affecting cost of Ayurvedic treatments and medicines such as consultation and diagnosis, medicines, location and ease of access, therapies etc. Then it moves on to the challenges of affordability and examines factors such as insurance coverage, cost variations and other things. Further, the article suggests solutions for making Ayurveda more affordable and accessible to people, which includes but is not limited to, various government schemes, integration of Ayurveda with other healthcare systems, research and standardization, community clinics and so on. Ayurveda has a lot to offer to this world and putting efforts in making it more affordable will benefit the world greatly. Further research may be conducted in order to accomplish the goal of this article in a broader way.

Key Words : Ayurveda, Cost, Affordability

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Introduction

Ayurveda, the ancient Indian form of medicine, has gained global recognition for its holistic approach to health and well-being. Rooted in a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit, Ayurveda offers a unique alternative to other medical practices. As more people seek Ayurveda and complementary treatments and therapies, the question of whether Ayurveda is accessible to all socioeconomic backgrounds becomes increasingly relevant. A critical concern that often arises is the affordability of Ayurvedic treatments and medicines, particularly in a world where healthcare costs continue to rise. In this article, the cost perspective of Ayurveda is explored and the factors influencing its affordability are examined.

The Unique Nature of Ayurveda

Ayurveda, which means “the science of life” in Sanskrit, is a traditional system of medicine that is being practiced for thousands of years. Ayurveda stands apart from modern medicine due to its personalized approach and emphasis on preventive health. It utilizes remedies, dietary guidelines, lifestyle modifications, and various therapies to address not just the symptoms but the root causes of illnesses. Ayurvedic treatment which focuses on maintaining the balance of mind, body, and spirit to achieve optimal health, is tailored to an individual’s unique constitution and imbalances. The holistic nature of Ayurveda is appealing to those seeking alternatives to other forms of medicine.

The Cost Factors of Ayurveda

Consultation and Diagnosis: Ayurvedic practitioners often spend more time with their patients, delving into

their lifestyle, diet, and emotional well-being. While this personalized approach can be beneficial, it can also translate into higher consultation fees, depending on the practitioner's experience and location. Ayurveda is becoming popular day by day and the demand for experienced doctors and practitioners is also increasing.

Ayurvedic Medicines: Cost of prescribed Ayurvedic medicines can vary widely. Some people may need simple and affordable supplements, while others with complex health issues may require more expensive, customized formulations.

Ayurveda relies on remedies, which can be more cost-effective than modern system of medicine if they are locally sourced subject to availability. However, in modern times, due to various regulations pertaining to utilisation of forest produce, climatic concerns and its effect on availability of required substances, affordability of ayurvedic medicines are becoming more of a pressing issue. For example, The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 while not mentioning medicinal plants specifically, protects 'specified' plants species, as enlisted in Schedule-VI of the Act, prohibits picking, uprooting, etc. of such listed plants growing in the wild. It may limit the availability of required medicinal plants.⁷

Accessibility and Location: The affordability of Ayurveda is also influenced by geographic location. Ayurvedic centres in developed countries or urban areas may charge higher fees compared to centres in rural areas or India. Ayurvedic treatments and procedures such as Panchakarma, Ksharsutra etc may prove costly in such scenarios. Ayurvedic treatments such as Panchakarma, which involve detoxification and rejuvenation, can be expensive due to the specialized equipment and requirements of skilled therapists.

Lifestyle Changes: Incorporating Ayurvedic principles into one's life may involve changes in dietary habits, daily routines, and practices like yoga and meditation. While these changes may not have direct monetary costs, they can require time and effort. For example, sometimes a

customised formula is recommended for joint pain which includes various leaves such as thornapples, Ficus religiosa etc shallow fried in sesame oil, rock salt and lemon which is time taking.

Challenges to Affordability

The affordability of Ayurveda can be a complex issue for a number of reasons:

Lack of Insurance Coverage: In many regions, Ayurveda is not covered by health insurance, which means that individuals must bear the full cost of their treatments. Although some insurance companies have started offering health insurance schemes, but it is far from an ideal coverage situation. More importantly, people generally use OPD services of Ayurveda more and insurance schemes usually do not cover OPD expenses making it even more burdening on pocket.

Limited Accessibility: Finding qualified Ayurvedic practitioners and quality medicines can be challenging, particularly in non-Indian regions. This may require individuals to travel, incurring additional costs.

Cost Variation: The costs associated with Ayurveda can be unpredictable and can escalate quickly, particularly for individuals with complex health issues. The cost of Ayurvedic treatment can vary greatly depending on the practitioner's experience, location, and the type of treatment needed. Economic disparity may further contribute to its inaccessibility. For instance, the price ranges for different treatments such as Panchakarma (a detoxification and rejuvenation therapy) are around INR 200-1500 per day, while a seven-day package costs around INR 10,000-15,000 (service and oil cost included). Even this might prove costly for a significant number of people.¹

The cost of Ayurvedic medicine can be affected by various factors, and these impacts can be seen differently depending on the viewpoint of the consumers and providers. For instance, some might suggest that increased quality control, standardization, and regulation could raise the production and distribution costs of Ayurvedic

medicine. However, others might argue that these measures could improve the quality and worth of Ayurvedic medicine and decrease the potential expenses related to side effects and complications. Cost variation may also be found due to manufacturer and the safety parameters followed by them in the manufacturing process. The degree of standardisation might be another factor here, which maybe a topic of interest for further research.

In the same vein, some might consider increased education and awareness as a cost-effective strategy that could boost the demand and use of Ayurvedic medicine. On the other hand, others might see these as an expensive outlay that could shift resources and focus away from other health priorities.

Solutions for making Ayurveda affordable

Government Schemes: Government of India, has launched several schemes to promote Ayurveda. Some of them are National Ayush Mission (NAM), Central Sector Scheme for Continuing Medical Education (CME), Central Sector Scheme for Extra Mural Research (EMR), Aahaar Kranti Mission. Central Sector Scheme for Continuing Medical Education (CME), which is being implemented from the 11th plan is part of the Ayurgyan scheme. Some of the components of CME are providing financial assistance to organizations, associations, and forums that promote AYUSH systems of medicine, organizing workshops and conferences in order to share knowledge, skills, and best practices across the disciplines.

The government has also launched accreditation portal for AYUSH educational institutions and AYUSH Sanjivani app to provide information about various aspects of Ayurveda such as home remedies, diet, yoga etc. Initiatives such as Har Din Har Ghar Ayurveda (2022) etc. celebrating Ayurveda for 6 weeks are steps in right direction⁴. One of the important government schemes is Central Government Health Scheme (CGHS) under which Wellness Centres (formerly known as CGHS

Dispensaries) are established. These centres also provide Ayurvedic treatments⁵. These wellness centres should be expanded to more tier 2 & tier 3 cities in order to make accessibility of ayurveda even more convenient and affordable providing the patients with more choice regarding their health. Ensuring regular and frequent visits of Medical Officers expert in Ayurveda to every CHC & PHC may further support the cause.^{2,3}

Integration with other Healthcare systems:

Governments and health systems could consider integrating Ayurveda into the broader healthcare system, offering more affordable access to the masses through initiatives such as Central Sector Scheme for Promotion of Ayush Intervention in Public Health Initiatives (PHI) which aims to promote the integration of Ayurveda with public health initiatives such as National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) and National Urban Health Mission (NUHM).

Research and Standardization: Further research and standardization of Ayurvedic treatments can help control costs and ensure quality. Standardization can assist in lowering the cost of Ayurvedic medications and treatments by streamlining production procedures and guaranteeing quality control. Research on economical treatment methods may find effective healthcare interventions, which can improve affordability even more. Apart from the various laws formulated by government of India such as The Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940, the Drugs and Cosmetics Rules, 1945 etc, WHO has also published its guidelines regarding assessing quality of herbal medicines.⁶ The Ministry of Ayush has established “National Medicinal Plants Board (NMPB)” an apex national body which coordinates all matters relating to medicinal plants in the country.² These statutes may benefit the cause of promoting Ayurveda.

Education and Awareness: Increasing awareness about the benefits of Ayurveda and educating individuals on how to incorporate Ayurvedic principles into their daily lives can help reduce costs. Encouraging the utilisation of tribal medicine and various home remedies may prove

to be efficient for the patients while also reducing the burden on our healthcare system. The education and awareness campaigns will become pivotal in achieving this. It should also be adjoined with economical aspects where tribal experts on traditional medicines including anyone with substantial knowledge should be invited to various institutes and forums to share their cultural heritage and knowledge.

Community Clinics: Establishing community-based Ayurvedic clinics that provide affordable as well as accessible consultations and treatments can make Ayurveda accessible to a wider population because Ayurveda is not only a treatment system for us but it also has a cultural heritage. The transmission of traditional Ayurvedic knowledge and practices from one generation to the next may greatly benefit from community clinics.

Conclusion

Ayurveda's holistic approach to health and well-being offers a valuable alternative to conventional medicine, but affordability remains a challenge. To address this issue, it is crucial to explore ways to integrate Ayurveda into healthcare systems, standardize treatments, and increase awareness about its benefits. By doing so, we can make Ayurveda more accessible and affordable to those seeking its unique approach to health and well-being. Balancing affordability and the quality of care is a task that requires collaboration between practitioners, policymakers, and the general public to ensure that Ayurveda's wisdom is within reach for all.

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